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MEMORANDUM

IRAN: Ending The Hostage Crisis and Afterwards

Summary

The Iranians for varying reasons are moving slowly toward a resolution of the hostage crisis. They remain highly suspicious of the US and will emphasize preventing the US from having any significant influence in Iran. []

Motivations for Release

With the formation of Prime Minister Rajai's fundamentalist-dominated government in early September, many of the clerics in the Islamic Republic Party apparently calculated that the political utility of holding the hostages had diminished. Ayatollah Beheshti and the other leaders of the Islamic Republic Party at the same time became increasingly concerned about popular discontent caused in part by the economic hardships resulting from Western sanctions. []

Assembly speaker Rafsanjani and other clerical leaders attempted to forge a consensus preparing for a release, but these efforts were derailed by a wave of intense xenophobia stimulated by the Iraq invasion. By mid-October movement on the issue began again, however, as the Iranians, possibly including Khomeini, became aware of the need to maintain equipment furnished by "the US enemy" and to end the economic sanctions which hinder efforts to buy weapons. []

While the clerics have emphasized their resolve to wage a guerrilla "peoples war," many probably also hope that US spare parts will give their forces the ability to inflict real damage on their enemies in Baghdad. They have vigorously rejected, on

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[redacted]

the other hand, all suggestions that hostages are to be "traded" for spare parts. They want in no way to seem dependent on the US. Any suggestion of such haggling would also tend to lessen claims that they have scored a moral victory over America. [redacted]

Struggling Towards a Release

Continuing xenophobia and anti-Americanism in Tehran greatly complicate efforts to release the hostages. Even those who favor a release make anti-US statements to protect their political bases. [redacted]

[redacted]

While Rafsanjani has said he will try again on Sunday for a resolution, he may wait till later in the week in hopes of getting support from those who do not want a release before the US Presidential election. Rafsanjani must move very carefully lest his fragile majority come unstuck. He no doubt is concerned that Khomeini might undercut him if it appears that critical elements do not support a release. [redacted]

Obstacles to Release

Even if Rafsanjani can muster a quorum in the Assembly and find a way to pass a measure supporting Khomeini's four conditions with only minor changes, additional delays are possible. Rajai and the government will have to negotiate implementation of the conditions with the US over the objection of hardliners who oppose direct contacts. Several crucial ambiguities will remain, including whether the hostages should be release in stages or as one group and whether the US must fulfill Iranian demands or only accept them. [redacted]

These issues could provide opportunities to hardliners, the militants, or leftists to delay actual release of the hostages. The militants could refuse to give up the hostages if they perceive any signs that Khomeini does not approve the Assembly's actions. It is unclear whether the Revolutionary Guards could be used to force compliance with a government order not supported by the hardliners. Leftist groups, such as the Mujahedin, which opposes any release, might orchestrate demonstrations supporting the militants' position. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

A statement from Khomeini endorsing release would open the way for a release, but he may be unwilling to act without evidence that popular feeling in Iran favors release. Moreover, as long as the war continues and suspicion remains that the US supports Iraq, Khomeini may remain silent on the hostage issue.

[redacted]

After the Release

Ayatollah Khomeini and other Iranian leaders will seek to portray the release of the hostages as a great victory for Iran. Both at home and abroad they will portray the end of the crisis as the triumph of Islamic justice over the "Great Satan."

[redacted]

Some hardline clerical extremists and the student militants will probably regret that the crisis has ended, but most Iranians will probably welcome its resolution. Most Iranians probably prefer an end to the crisis so that the country can focus its attention on the war with Iraq and Iran's economic problems.

[redacted]

The clerics may gain from the resolution of the crisis if they can successfully portray US concessions as the result of their efforts rather than Bani-Sadr's. The clerics will point to any US concessions as justification for their long battle against Bani-Sadr.

[redacted]

Impact on Iran-US Relations

The Khomeini regime will almost certainly not be ready to resume diplomatic relations with the US once the crisis ends. As long as Khomeini is alive Tehran will continue to be influenced by his deeply anti-American ideology. For Khomeini, freeing Iran of US influence is one of the most important goals and triumphs of the Iranian revolution. The clerics would fear that any US reinvolverment would strengthen their secular opponents. Many probably believe that the US is secretly plotting with exiles to overturn the Islamic Republic.

[redacted]

Nonetheless, the Iranians almost certainly will want to gain access to US military equipment, especially spare parts for the equipment the Shah purchased in the 1970s. Tehran might also express interest in purchasing additional US equipment with which to fight Baghdad especially from US allies like Taiwan and South Korea.

[redacted]